

GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND NATIONALISM IN *WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA*

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ABSTRACT

The Second World War period's growing chasm between the Hindu and Muslims communities, India and Britain, the Bengal hungers, the "Quit India" movement and the mounting frustration and misery are covered in novels like Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers, R. K. Narayan's Waiting for the Mahatma and Kamala Markandya's Some Inner Fury. R. K. Narayan is a novelist, who undoubtedly is one with his people and surroundings. He has mastered the craft of representing his people, their values and ethos. There are claims of his concern about the daily travails and frustrations of his characters and a general apathy towards their contribution to the society and politics. Some critics have even claimed that Narayan is essentially apolitical. Similarly, there are other critics who eulogize Narayan and argue that, any work of art is considered to be the product of the historical, political, social and economic movements of its time. So, they have explored the presentation of national tradition in the works of R. K. Narayan. This paper discusses Waiting for the Mahatma as a work which reverberates with Gandhian philosophy and ideology of nationalism of 1950's.

KEYWORDS: *Waiting for the Mahatma, R. K. Narayan, Gandhian philosophy & Nationalism*

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In the Second World War period, there was growing chasm between the Hindu and Muslim communities and between India and Britain, the Bengal hungers, the "Quit India" movement, and the mounting frustration and misery are covered in novels like Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*, R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Kamala Markandya's *Some Inner Fury*. R.K.Narayan is a novelist, who undoubtedly is one with his people and surroundings. He has mastered the craft of representing his people, their values and ethos. John Updike writes:

What a wealth of material becomes available to a writer who can simply assert such a sense of community!

...of writers immersed in their material and enabled to draw tales from a community of neighbours, Faulkner

Was our last great example An instinctive, respectful identification with the people of one's locale comes

Hard now, in the menacing cities or disposable suburbs, yet without it a genuine belief in the significance of humanity, in human significance, comes not at all! (Rao, 2004, p.116)

Various critics took a clue from this statement and discussed R. K. Narayan's novels, as studied in the spiritual quest of his characters. There are claims of his concern about the daily travails and frustrations of his characters and a general apathy towards their contribution to the society and politics. Some critics have even claimed that Narayan is essentially apolitical. Similarly, there are other critics who eulogize Narayan and argue that, any work of art is considered to be the product of the historical, political, social and economical movements of its time. So, they have explored the presentation of national tradition in the works of R. K. Narayan. *Waiting for the Mahatma*

reverbrates with Gandhian philosophy and ideology of nationalism of 1950's.

Belinsky wrote, "The secret of a people's nationality lies not in its clothing or cuisine but in its, so to say, manner of understanding things. To correctly portray a society, one must first comprehend its essence, its peculiarity – and the only way that can be achieved is, by actually learning and philosophically assessing the sum total of rules governing and upholding that society"(Belinsky, 1955, p.443). It is the quality of being able to penetrate into the essence of things that Narayan fully possesses, and can hence express in his works the innermost depth and pulse of his native society's life. The throbbing of the country's political pulse can be one of the signs revealing the innermost life of India.

R.K.Narayan's autobiography *My Days*(1973) helps to interpret his real life, although he was away from national or international politics like his characters, he was still in fear. Narayan has always expressed his abhorrence for politics and political movements. But his mind was greatly impressed by the Second World War situation with the attack on Pearl Harbour and Gandhiji's non-violent agitation for India's independence. He had his involvement in the nationalist fervor during his school days when he had joined the Besant Scouts and had taken an oath to serve not God, Crown and Country but God, Freedom and India. His nationalistic sentiment as presented in *My Days* is also reflected in some of his novels. In *Waiting for the Mahatma* (2008), Narayan has told his sentiment of suppression and of foreign rule. R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma* deals with impact of Gandhism on Indian political life. This impact is felt by an individual. Though SrinivasaIyengar has rightly pointed out that Gandhi is too big to be given a minor part and "the best thing for the contemporary novelist would be to keep Gandhi in the background" so as to make "his influence felt indirectly"(Parvathi, 1979). R.K. Narayan has introduced Gandhi as a warm and compassionate human being who touches two young lives. Though always remaining in the background, his influence is felt like the sandalwood in the novel. It is deification of Mahatma Gandhi in the novel that is attention catching. No one, particularly an Indian, would be ignorant of the colossal stature of Mahatma Gandhi, his awesome and commanding presence in the days when India was writhing under colonial power.

Gandhian thought democratized the social and political activities by including the commonest and the lowliest in the freedom struggle. Consciousness of freedom percolated to the grass roots of Indian society and revolutionized its thinking. People of India for the first time started thinking in terms of India as one nation. They rose above their regional loyalties and felt emotionally one for the first time. A.V. Krishna Rao says Narayan has undertaken the crucial task of "concretizing a crucial part of the national experience spread over a period of three decades- from the end of the First World War till India's attainment of Independence"(Krishna Rao, 1971, p.86).

In *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) Narayan breaks new grounds. The various characters in *Waiting for the Mahatma* are subjected to the strong current of Gandhian influence. Those like Bharati acquire a momentum of their own. They willingly jump into the river and swim with the current. There are others like Sriram, who have no understanding of the nature of the current, nor where it is leading to. The immediate point of interest in *Waiting for the Mahatma* is the love between Bharati and Sriram. Bharati is an ardent follower of Gandhi, and it is because of her that Sriram also joins the Gandhian movement. For a period he comes under the influence of Jagdish the terrorist, himself becomes a terrorist, and goes to jail. Then comes independence, followed by Gandhi's assassination. The novel ends with Bharati and Sriram about to marry.

Here, it needs to be emphasized that as an accomplished artist, Narayan need not debate the pros and cons of Gandhian ideology in an obvious manner. The influence of Gandhian thought is incorporated in the vision of life that

Narayan's novel present. His novel upholds traditional Indian values, but, these are not the values of ancient Indian tradition, but values reoriented by Gandhian thought.

To Gandhi, national realization included the ending of political subjection and economic degradation, the removal of social inequalities and abuses like untouchability, caste arrogance, occupational prejudices etc, the reform of education and giving new life to language and literature. There were of course, largely inter-related problems, though they had to be attacked individually also.

Narayan has depicted the neglected caste of the South India and their suffering Gandhi had launched the nationwide campaign. Narayan in his "Malgudi World" accepts this issue skillfully. Narayan has not clearly mentioned, Bharati's social and family background, but he mentions how after the death of her parents she was adopted by the local Sewak Sangh. And, she remains the Gandhian worker upto the end of the novel. As a part of untouchables acceptance mission of Gandhi, he had started Harijan Sewak Sangh to change upper castes' attitude towards untouchables. Narayan has nicely plucked out this point in his novel. Sriram belongs to the upper-caste who remains fascinated towards her. Sriram's love for Bharti is the guiding force for him. He finds a message of love even in the speech made by Gandhiji:

Gandhiji held up his hand to say, 'It is not enough for you to clap your hands and show your appreciation of me. I am not prepared to accept it all so easily. I want you really to make sure of a change in your hearts before you ever think of asking the British to leave the shores of India. It's all very well for you to take up the cry and create an uproar. But that's not enough. I want you to clear your hearts and minds and make certain that only love resides there, and there is no residue of bitterness for past history. Only then can you say to the British, "Please leave this country to be managed or mismanaged by us, that's purely our own business, and come back any time you like as our friends and distinguished guests, not as our rulers," and you will find John Bull packing his suitcase. But be sure you have in your heart love and not bitterness.'

Sriram told himself, looking at the vision beside the microphone, 'Definitely it's not bitterness. I love her.'
(Narayan, 2008, p.32)

Narayan weaves the magic of his story-telling genius. He takes the philosophy of love and 'Ahimsa' which shook the foundations of British Empire and blends it with the story of the novel. With this main story of Sriram and Bharti, Narayan has depicted untouchables of "Malgudi" which creates the real picture of untouchables of that era. He has depicted the untouchables' colony, which is situated on the bank of a river where Gandhi prefers to live with the scavengers in their huts as a member of their family. He identifies himself as scavenger and also tells other orthodox Hindus to repent on their inhuman deeds towards untouchables. Gandhian thoughts are appropriately interwoven in this novel. Narayan depicts that Gandhi addresses the people of Malgudi. The people greet him with raising hands and clapping. Gandhi says to them, "I want to see unity in it" (Narayan, 2008, p.27). In the public meeting of Malgudi, Gandhi speaks on untouchability and caste. Everybody gathered there listens silently. There he also speaks on "Khaddar" and inspires people to use it. Weavers and weaving profession were considered untouchable but Gandhi tried to convince the orthodox Hindus to change their wrong attitude towards both. Narayan fictionalizes the way in which Gandhi tried to divert the orthodox Hindus' mind on Harijan issue.

His preference for "Khaddar" was actually a plea for India's village industries because, he thought they would avoid the exploitation and misery inherent in large scale factory production. Gandhi is seen spinning at various points.

There are various references to “spinning wheel” in the novel:

The Mahatma said, “Nowadays I generally get up an hour earlier in order to be able to do this: spinning a certain length is my most important work: even my prayer comes only after that. I’d very much like you to take a vow to wear only cloth made out of your own hands each day.” (Narayan, 2008, p.67)

A considerable part of the novel appears to be a confession under Mahatma’s influence of his silent affiliation to Mahatma Gandhi’s “Quit India”, and “Salt-Satyagraha” nationalism is found everywhere with the distribution of nationalist leaflets and guerrilla activities. In *Waiting for the Mahatma* we see a glimpse of India about 1942. Sriram derives his inspiration more from Gandhi than Bharati. Even when Gandhi is not present in Malgudi, Sriram feels that his “movements were being guided”. Living almost a hermit’s life, he receives communication from Gandhi through Bharati. This time, it is the “Quit India call of 1942”. The narrator’s direct comment on the efficacy of the “Quit India” movement reflects the Narayan’s own attitude towards Gandhian methodologies of political action.

The Mahatma had in his famous resolution of August 1942 said: ‘Britain must Quit India’, and the phrase had the potency of a mantra or a magic formula. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, people cried ‘Quit India’. The Home Secretary grew uneasy at the sound of it. It became a prohibited phrase in polite society. After the Mahatma uttered the phrase, he was put in prison; but the phrase took life and flourished, and did ultimately produce enough power to send the British away. There was not a blank wall in the whole country which did not carry the message. Wherever one turned one saw ‘Quit India’. (Narayan, 2008, p.102)

There is also a reference to “Salt Satyagraha” in 1931. Sriram, in his bit to enlighten poor Indian says: “For every pinch of salt you consume, you have to pay tax to the English government” (Narayan, 2008, p.119-120). He then elaborates about Mahatma Gandhi’s march to Dandi Beach. Then again, there is a reference to 1920’s “Non-cooperation movement”. Bharati’s father died during this movement. People like Gopad are there who remarks: “I will not rest till British are sent out of India” (Narayan, 2008, p.75). Whole novel is suffused with such ideas. The sole objective of Gandhi’s mass movements was to arouse all-India consciousness, the first requisite of the growth of national identity. These movements resulted in the mass splurge of people which has been depicted in the novel.

Gandhi’s “Swadeshi Movement” was aimed at embracing all that was swadeshi, and hence English being a foreign language came under the scrutiny of this movement. The use of the English language by the Indians was often denounced, and Hindi was seen as a possible substitute. In his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan has made Gandhi declare that he will not deliver his lecture in English because, “It’s the language of our rulers. It has enslaved us” (Narayan, 2008, p.27).

Sriram becomes “an accredited member of the group”. This takes him to villages and educates him in the realities of the village life where he sees hungry men and women with skin stretched over their bones. In an unobtrusive way Narayan touches on the basic issue of Gandhian Campaign, the colonial exploitation during the Second World War. Forests and fields were plundered to keep the British war machinery going. There is no food due to famine. The Second World War being fought in Europe has its repercussions here. Indian villagers are not bombed but the wagons carry timber, corn and able-bodied men to Britain thus exploiting Indian resources for their own benefit.

Sriram’s participation in the terrorist activities that lands him in jail, convinces him of the rightness of the Gandhian path. This also gives Narayan a reason to present two different ideological points of view- Gandhian and

Marxist-representing non-violence and violence respectively. It is significant that chastened by the jail experiences, Sriram finally submits himself to Gandhian philosophy.

Waiting for the Mahatma bears a clear imprint of the Gandhian influence, which has revolutionized the very social structure of our otherwise fossilized social life. Gandhi's psychological, rather than physical presence in the novel lends a mythical aura. Since Gandhi appears only twice in the novel. One cannot, but appreciate the subtle way in which Narayan has portrayed India with inherent nationalistic feelings in him. With an unmistakable authenticity of tone and treatment he deals with nationalism.

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